

Chafee signs law bolstering R.I.'s efforts to ease impact of climate change

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By RICHARD SALIT

JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

NORTH KINGSTOWN, R.I. — Choosing as their backdrop the quaint seaside village of Wickford and the shimmering waters of Narragansett Bay, officials gathered at Town Beach on Friday to commemorate Rhode Island's most ambitious response to climate change and its coastal impacts.

The occasion was Governor Chafee's ceremonial signing of The Resilient Rhode Island Act, the state's first comprehensive climate change bill, overwhelmingly passed during the General Assembly's frenzied rush toward the session's end in June.

Supporters took advantage of a quiet, ordinary summer day to celebrate the new law and the extraordinary ways they say it will help Rhode Island slow climate change and make the state more resilient to rising seas and severe weather.

"We are not debating climate change. We are focusing on what we can do about it," said Jamia McDonald, executive director of the Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency and the vice chair of a new panel created by the law, the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council.

Chafee, a longtime advocate for addressing climate change, said that "extreme weather is here ... We want to prepare for that. We know it's occurring. We know it's as a result of human activity. So we are taking action here in Rhode Island."

Rhode Island joins about a dozen other states, including Massachusetts and Connecticut, that have enacted similar laws. Its passage follows President Obama's recent moves to address climate change through executive orders, including requiring states to cut emissions from coal-fired power plants.

While some environmental rules have immediate and visible effects — such as Barrington's ban on plastic bags and the mandated stormwater-sewer overflow project in Providence — the Resilient Rhode Island Act is much more about getting state and community officials to work together to make climate change a top priority in all of their planning.

It does that by creating the climate council, made up mostly of state department heads, to coordinate efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change. The council will be supported by a 13-member advisory board, to be appointed by the governor and General Assembly, and a nine-member science and technical advisory board.

The Department of Administration's statewide planning office is charged with leading community efforts to adapt to a changing climate, such as protecting natural buffers in flood-prone areas, encouraging low-impact development and green infrastructure, and updating building codes.

The state Department of Environmental Management, with its duties to regulate air quality, will be responsible for meeting targets for cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. The reduction targets are 10 percent from 1990 levels by 2020, 45 percent by 2035 and 80 percent by 2050. The law requires the climate council to submit by 2017 a report on how the state can meet these targets.

North Kingstown was chosen as the location for the ceremonial signing because the town's planning office has spearheaded several pilot programs to project how Wickford and other areas would be affected by flooding from storm surges atop sea level rise. It is now revising its comprehensive plan to address its vulnerabilities.

"We have learned how serious the challenge is," said Council President Elizabeth Dolan. "We have learned climate change is here already."

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., who has made climate change a priority in Washington despite substantial Republican opposition, said, "How nice it is to be here with people who aren't denying that this is happening."

It was only through collaboration that the law was drafted and passed and it's only through continued partnerships that the state can successfully respond, several speakers said. That's why a wide array of people were invited to attend, including representatives of the General Assembly, state agencies, environmental groups and business associations.

Among the speakers were the legislators who sponsored the bill and shepherded it through the State House — Senators V. Susan Sosnowski and William Conley and Rep. Arthur Handy.

Echoing other speakers, Sosnowski asserted that Rhode Island is "well poised to be a leader in climate mitigation" and could enjoy part of the \$1 billion that the "resilient sector" is estimated to generate in the United States by 2016.

The support of the local universities, she said, will help the state respond and hone its expertise.

Another speaker, University of Rhode Island President David Dooley, pledged the continuing support of his researchers, professors, and students to work "with people who believe what scientists have to say about this ... We are committed to doing our part."

Correction: the new law does not, as an earlier House version of the legislation did, divide responsibilities between the Statewide Planning Office (for adaptation) and the Department of Environmental Management (for mitigation). Instead, all state agencies share responsibility for helping to meet both mitigation and adaptation goals, and to work with the Coordinating Council to that end. — Jan Reitsma